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The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
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Louise Duvall, Urbandale, Iowa Meredith Ferguson Louise's home in Urbandale, Iowa 3-30-2011

Meredith Ferguson: This is Meredith Ferguson and I am interviewing Louise Duvall. The date is March 30, 2011. The time is...

Louise Duvall: 1:38

Ferguson: 1:38. The interview is taking place in Louise's home in Urbandale, Iowa. The relationship between us; Louise and I are both working on the Oral History Project, but other than that we don't know a lot about each other. I'm not going to ask for all your personal information again because that was covered in the previous interview. I guess I don't need to say that the purpose of this interview, because that's on the other one, too. So, I'll just ask if I have your consent to tape this interview.

Duvall: You do.

Ferguson: Okay. Good deal. My first question was you were at the Department when Dr. Jernigan was still there. I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what it was like when he left. I understand it was a very hectic period, and there was a lot going on.

Duvall: Okay. Well, first of all, when he was in lowa, no one called him Dr. Jernigan. He was just Mr. Jernigan and his Doctorate; I'm not sure where that's from. That may be from one of the Universities in Tennessee was um...what is it when they just present it to you because you're an alumni and you're interesting or something?

Ferguson: Oh, like a commencement ceremony. Okay; honorary.

Duvall: Yes, it's an Honorary Degree. So, he went by Mr. Jernigan. He was very, very formal in how he dressed;

always in a dark suit and vest, always in a white shirt with French cuffs, always with a folded white hankie in his pocket. And so, he expected that same standard among the other employees. So, we all dressed in our Sunday best. The guys could not wear colored shirts. They had to wear white shirts. We always had to wear hose. We always referred to ourselves as Mr. or Miss. or Mrs., even though we may share a room when we're traveling, or whatever. You just never broke the rule because then you might slip up in public sometime and that would not be a good thing.

I wanted to talk a little bit, if you don't mind, about the National Federation of the Blind conventions. And, we'll get around to the day that Mr. Jernigan left, as how that kind of fits into the timeline if it's okay with you.

Ferguson: Un-huh.

Duvall: I want to talk about my very first National Federation of the Blind or NFB Convention was in New York City, and that would have been in 1973. We stayed at the Statler Hilton Hotel, which I think you could describe as shabby-sheik. It was very inexpensive. I was told that I was to report to the Presidential Suite. Now, I was attending this convention as the spouse of an employee. But, at first I thought it would just be kind of fun to have something to do. So, if they were going to assign me a job, why okay, I'll go do that.

So, the Presidential suite was a really large and elaborate thing. It had a big dining room table. It had an office where Mr. Jernigan met people all day long. There was a secretary who made appointments. There was a kitchen, and Mrs. Jernigan was a Dietitian for the state of

lowa, a wonderful cook and a gracious hostess. She kept food going all the time out on that buffet table. Then my job was to wash all the dishes in the little powder room. Oh gosh, I was all dressed up in high heels and a suit and it was so hot and steamy in that little bathroom. You couldn't help but splash because it wasn't set up like a kitchen, you know, it wasn't very tall and I am very tall. Anyway, I had a very messy and unpleasant day of work. And, no one ever said thank you when my shift was over. So, the next day I wasn't available. I was never assigned kitchen duty again.

The next year I worked at Registration. I handed out the Braille and Print Agendas and that came with a chair. That just suited me just fine. That was the two years that I attended as a staff meeting.

In 1976, I attended the Los Angeles National Convention. The National Conventions were always held over the week of the 4th of July. And, this was so employed people would have to take less time off from work. And also, the hotel rates are always cheaper on holidays. I guess 4th of July more people are thinking about going to the beach shore, the races or something more outdoorsy and fun than they are about going to some stuffy old hotel for conventions and things. So, we always got good hotel rates.

Nearly all the staff was expected to attend. We closed the Orientation Center so that the staff and the students could go. We had to take a collection among the staff because not all the students had money to go. They would double up in rooms or triple or quad up, whatever it would take. We would make some contributions. Then Mr. Jernigan was always a gracious host and he would say to people, "There is no reason for you ever to go hungry; that if you don't have enough money to go out for meals why then

come up to the Presidential Suite and there's always something to eat here." I know where some of that came from.

Anyway, in Field Operations almost everyone went, including the secretaries. They would usually leave behind one supervisor or one Counselor to kind of answer the phone and run the place, but everyone else was expected to go. There were truckloads of literature, office supplies, a photocopier, typewriters, Braille Writers, items for sale from the Aids and Devices Department. All these were shipped from Des Moines to the site of the National Convention. Able-bodied staff, in their suits, were expected to unload those trucks usually in a smelly alley behind the hotel. Then they were to set up the displays, the literature room, registration tables, haul the food and dishes and things up to the Presidential Suite and whatever. And, once again, let me mention all in our good clothes.

Mary Ellen Anderson was in charge of the Convention. Mr. John Taylor, who was past President of The National Federation of the Blind, was head of Field Operations when I was working at the Department. Dave Quick and other Field Op. staff ran the registration table, sold meal tickets, kept track kept tallies of all the attendees and the numbers of attendees by state, and by who was going to the various lunches and banquets and things.

In 1977, we went to New Orleans. We knew, we, meaning the staff, that something was up because Mr. Jernigan established, or appointed, a new committee. There's always been Registration Committee and Literature Committee and various work assignments, but this time he established something called Peace, Harmony and Goodwill committee. Jim Witte was made chair. When we all got to

New Orleans we found out that no hotel was big enough to hold all of us, and so we were scattered all over the city. Staff was scattered all over, and so were attendees to this Blind Convention; which meant there were a lot of people who were unhappy, because they were not necessarily comfortable traveling in a strange city like New Orleans, and at all hours of the day and night back and forth to wherever the meetings were being held or the main Convention was going on.

The weather in New Orleans over the 4th of July is unbearable. You couldn't tell if it was raining or if it was steam just coming up from the sidewalk. And the other thing that I could hardly believe was roaches. But, in the south people live with roaches as if it's no big deal. Just like growing up on the farm, having a mouse in your house just meant it was fall.

Well, the morning I opened up my medicine chest and saw a roach run across my toothbrush was just about my last day at Convention. My roommate was Rosemary Toddy and she and I went down for breakfast, and it was a steam table kind of thing where you walked through and they served you. There calmly walking across the top of the sneeze guard was a roach. And, the lady who was serving the scrambled eggs had her little hot towel and she reached up and wiped off the body and put it back down right next to the grits and just kept serving. This was a shock for me. I just could hardly deal with that.

Rosemary was getting married on the Saturday at the end of the National Convention. Mr. Jernigan would not let her miss the Convention; she had to go. She was a Rehab. Teacher, as was I in that year. She could leave a little early

on Friday to get back home to get married on Saturday. So, there was a very strong emphasis on attendance.

The big news, and we knew that there was going to be big news, but we didn't know what it was. The big news was that Mr. Jernigan resigned. So, he was resigning as President of the National Federation of the Blind. So, I believe that there had been Jacobus tenBroek, who had started the Organization, and when he got too ill to continue, John Taylor was President for a year or so. Then Mr. Jernigan took over. That was...So, from the mid '40s until...We're in 1977, so for thirty years there had only been three Presidents.

Mr. Jernigan announced to everybody. Of course, everyone was shocked and surprised, that he had purchased a city block in Baltimore that he was going to set up a National Center that it would have a Library and a Technology Center and it would be a training session for blind people.

(End of Recording 1) 13:07

(Beginning of Recording 2)

Duvall: Ralph Saunders was elected President, and he was going to take over for Mr. Jernigan starting immediately. All I remember about Ralph was that he wore leisure suits. You know, they were popular in the '70s. He had a pink one and a yellow one. Other than that I can't remember much about him at all. I said earlier that that was very, very different from the way that Mr. Jernigan dressed.

In the spring of 1978, Mr. Jernigan resigned as the lowar Director. We had been beaten up by the local press. Jerry Sumsky was the writer of most of those articles. Roxanne Conlin was attorney for the Federal Southern District, and she had ordered the FBI to raid the Commission. They were looking for guns. So, if you can imagine, who could seriously believe that an Agency for the Blind would have guns, antiaircraft guns, on their roof. Anyway, the FBI searched the entire building and all they found of note were outdated crackers in the air-raid shelter, bomb-shelter. So, I was out on the road at the time and I remember every place I went had the TV on and somebody was broadcasting about the raid on the Commission Building. And, of course, we didn't get anything done because that's all that anybody wanted to talk about. And, of course, I didn't know anything about it because I wasn't there.

That same year, Joe Balderston who was the Supervisor for Vocational Rehabilitation, he's the one who approved all the individual plans for blind clients, announced that he was going to retire. Joe had also been one of the first two Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors in Iowa. He had traveled the western part of the state. If you've listened to Lucy Bagley talk about who came to see her husband, Monty, when they were in Fort Dodge, it was Joe Balderston. So anyway, Joe was from Nebraska. He had been a Rehab. Counselor out there first and then he'd come to Iowa. He was a blind guy; so was his wife. He never carried a cane. He never read Braille. He just got along or made do with what vision he had.

So, in 1978 I was a Rehab. Teacher and I was not part of the inner circle. My guests for this potluck that I had planned for Joe were late in getting there and some of them

looked kind of be-draggled. As the evening progressed, I began to hear bits and pieces from them that showed that they had spent the entire day packing things from Mr. Jernigan. Now that they were off the property and out of his earshot they were asking each other questions about, "Should that have really gone? Should that have been packed? Didn't that belong to the Department?" Among some of the things that "disappeared" was an almost full sized portrait of Mr. Jernigan that used to hang in the front hallway. That was a gift, I believe to the Department from the staff. Because the rules are that you cannot give a gift to your boss. That is considered trying to influence them somehow or another. So, they fell under that gift law up to the same extent as if you were giving a gift to a Legislator or someone else who might impact your program. So, he did not own that, and when it disappeared we could not figure out who else would want it, other than perhaps him. So, never ever heard that it was ever seen, but it did disappear.

Other things that disappeared were many hand-Brailled books, in that Mr. Jernigan was a veracious reader. His specialty was Science-Fiction; especially Science-Fiction that had an interesting philosophical twist to it or something. At one time, Science-Fiction Brailled books had filled the Director's Conference Room. After he left, other things were moved in to fill up the shelves and stuff; there's encyclopedias in there and other kinds of things.

Also, what disappeared is that there used to be some little slush funds and we, as individuals, were not allowed to accept gifts from clients or the Lion's Clubs or whoever we might be doing; if we were doing a speaking engagement. And yet, a lot of times they would give us 20 bucks or a check for 50 dollars, or something like that. So, we would

bring them back and one might say that they should have gone into the State Treasury. Others might say that since we were doing this on our own time in the evenings or on Saturdays or whatever, that the rule was a little more lenient. But, we had pretty much all agreed that there was a fund that was maintained in the Library, and it could be tapped if there was a client with great needs.

I remember that at one time there was a proposal that we tap into that to buy a room air conditioner for a blind lady who was dying of cancer and it was hot and she was miserable; she didn't have any money. That just seemed like just a perfectly wonderful logical thing to do. So, there were other examples. Sometimes, Santa clause had to dip into there for some families who had many children, or whatever.

It was just a little slush fund, and we kept it going by making our donations when we received some of these speaking engagement gifts. Well, that went. None of us knew how much money was in it, but it was, the account was closed and it was gone.

The 1978 Convention was held in Baltimore. People were encouraged to tour the new NFB building that would become the new Center for Blindness. I chose to tour the Baltimore city Cemetery where Edgar Allen Poe was buried. So, I've never seen the National Center.

In `1979, we went to Miami Beach. This was the last year that the Iowa Commission Staff worked the Convention. It was very apparent that sighted staff was providing the manpower and blind staff was excused. This was the year that several of us carried Tennessee Hams as carry-on luggage from Iowa to Miami. Some of us were issued walkie-talkies so that we were never off-duty. Somehow the batteries ran down before the week was over.

By 1980, the Minneapolis, that was the Minneapolis convention. Only John Taylor, who was the Director, and a handful of blind staff attended. This was right in the middle of lowa's problems with the NFB, and the staff was getting booted out.

When I started work at the lowa Commission for the Blind, it was explained to me that I was expected to join and participate in NFB activities. My territory as a Rehabilitation Teacher contained five NFB Chapters and I belonged to them all. There was an Eldora, Iowa Falls, New Hampton, a Mason City, an Emmetsburg, Algona, Titonka, one in Fort Dodge, and one in Des Moines. We had booths at the local county fairs; we did fund raisers; we had speaking engagements. As staff, we brought supplies to the meeting, we returned library books, and all of this strengthened the Agency and Consumer link.

Every Memorial Day the NFB held it's State Convention. It moved back and forth across the state and local chapters, hosted the event and collected door prizes. Field Staff was expected to help with transportation. The State Organization held Legislative Receptions during the Legislative Session to entertain and educate and feed our Senators and our Representatives. This was before the gift law.

Tony Cobb had been a teacher at the Tennessee School for the Blind. Both Mr. Jernigan and Mr. Taylor were alumni of the Tennessee School. Tony and Jim Omvig shared a short hallway on third floor and Becky Cox was their Secretary. All three of them reported directly to Mr. Jernigan. As Mr. Jernigan started up the National Center, he recruited people from his former staff. Mary Ellen Anderson was his right-hand person. Jim Omvig got a job with the

Social Security Administration, and his wife Sharon went to work at the Center. From the Library, Lorraine Rovig, Ron Lundquist and Mickey Smith; Mark and Patti Mauer; Patti was in the Orientation Center. Jim and Arlene Gashell; Jim was in the Orientation center. Jim Stiffler, who was a Rehab Counselor, went to work for BISM, which I'm not sure what it stands for, except it's Business Enterprise Services in Maryland.

Ferguson: Okay.

Duvall: Mr. Taylor became the Commission's Director with Mr. Jernigan's blessing, at least at first. Soon, Mr. Taylor started making his own decisions and hiring his own staff. He brought Tony Cobb and Becky Cox down to the Administration Office and made Tony the Deputy Director in charge of Operations. During this time, Tony attended Graduate School at Drake University. The agency paid his tuition and while he was there he developed job classifications for all staff. He didn't prepare staff for this: that it was going to happen. He did not consult with staff about the job responsibilities and he implemented a twoclass system; salaried staff versus wage and hour staff. Secret meetings were held and an Employee Organization was established. When a large wreath of black dead flowers was delivered to Tony, he looked shocked, surprised and somewhat fearful. There was not much sympathy from the staff.

Ferguson: Wow.

Duvall: In late 1980, the Department received a grant to establish a Center for Independent Living. I was hired as the Manager. I went off to St. Louis to meet with all the other grantees for a training session. I sat next to a blind guy who identified himself as having been a Peer Reviewer for our grant. He related that he had been contacted by Mr. Jernigan and told not to approve funding. But, he thought ours was a good grant application and it was the only one for the blind; so he approved it. When I returned to Iowa, I reported this to Mr. Taylor, who must have shared with the Commission Board. I got a call from Rich Crawford, who at that time was the commissioner. He called me a liar and related that he had called Mr. Jernigan and asked him outright about this and Mr. Jernigan had denied it. Looking back on this and other events, I believe Mr. Jernigan didn't want lowa to be the brightest star in the field of blindness. He was building New Mexico with Fred Schroeder from Nebraska, and Dick Davis, who was an Iowan, and the Idaho agency with Jan Omvig, Ramone Wallhoff and Ray and Mary Ellen Halverson; all from Iowa.

Anyway, this Center for Independent Living was required to have an Advisory Committee, and I believe that Mr. Taylor appointed every person who called and complained to that Advisory Committee. They all had opinions, but nobody wanted to work. It took a few years, but that Advisory Committee became a solid source of support for the Department.

Something else that was happening at this same time was Legalized Gambling; first came bingo. To get a license to run a bingo parlor you had to have a designated charity that you were going to donate a percent of the winnings. When Mr. Jernigan went to Baltimore he emptied out the

Gifts and Bequests money, and so an organization was started called The Iowa Service Foundation for the Blind. This organization became the recipient of the charity donations from the Bingo Parlor on Southeast 14th, and did for many years.

Another recipient of gambling money became the Tri-State Independent Blind Society, run by Don Goney and his family in Dubuque. The Tri-State Independent Blind owns an old grocery store. In that they have a huge bingo operation that brings in senior citizens by the busload from Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, as well as Iowa. They do very well financially. They claim then that they provide instruction for blind people. I have toured their facility and Don Goney, who is a graduate of our Orientation Center, identifies himself as an Instructor. And, they have an Optometrist who comes about once a week and recommends some low-vision devices, which are usually magnifiers; and the magnifiers they have bought from our Aids and Devices and then put a new sticker on them and increased the price. Ah, plus of course they have concessions. They sell pop and popcorn and maid-rites and feed the people who are playing bingo. So, they do very well by themselves.

(End of Recording 2) 17:21

(Beginning of Recording 3)

Duvall: Before Mr. Jernigan moved to Baltimore, he kept the Randolph Hotel Presidential Suite as rental property for the NFB, for The United Brotherhood of the Blind, and various other organizations that raised money for the blind. There were projects like selling unsolicited mailings. Used to be you'd get things in the mail and they'd ask you for a donation. A lot of organizations used to do that. I think now we're pretty well down to, well, the National Wildlife sends me Christmas cards and once and a while I'll get sheets of return address stickers. But, in this group there were greeting cards that they would send out and there was some cover letter saying, "This is being sent to you by blind people and your contributions will help." And, then there was this sad, sad story. I can't even remember what it was anymore. It was a penny. The penny was mailed out along with this cover story. People would feel sorry for the blind and send money in. We also sold neckties; just can hardly believe that.

Ferguson: Neckties? (Laughter)

Duvall: There was a huge business; and one year at the National Convention, this guy, I think it was the year we were in Texas, I can't remember. He came with all of his neckties. This always reminds me of those underhanded street corner salesmen who have the fake Rolexes, you know. They flash open their coats and here are all these fake watches. Somehow I get that same visual image with the neckties. That you flash open your coat and here's all these neckties. They weren't, of course; that was a legitimate business and they would sell to the Brotherhood or who ever it was and then they would get their money and we would get a percent of the profit.

Now, I mentioned the Brotherhood. You may not have heard much about that. That was a fund raising arm of the NFB. One of the things they did is that they took care of Margaret Warren. Margaret Warren is a deaf/blind individual who lives in the Garden Apartments at Wesley Acres. She is the last living resident of The Home for Sightless Women.

Ferguson: I've heard of that.

Duvall: And so, the Brotherhood pays for a companion for Margaret. Not as often as she would like to have, of course, to a certain extent. A lot of times it's Ray Martin, who was a Pastor at First Methodist, and Margaret was a Methodist or it could be his wife, who is Mary Ann Martin. For many years their children would accompany Margaret to the NFB Convention, share a room with her, make sure she got meals and stuff, walk her back and forth to all the meetings, and then there would be a Committee among the NFB people, often lowans, who would use the Tele-Touch and try to interpret the speaker as fast as they could go and Margaret could understand. Then she would be able to follow along what was going on at the various meetings. So, the Brotherhood would pay her transportation and they would pay for the costs of her assistants. Over the years I think they have made some donations to help with, oh, just make it a little more comfortable in her apartment.

I know personally that Ruth Schroeder, who was the first Home Ec. Teacher; that she used to take Margaret shopping. In fact, I was in the middle. I would have this totally blind shopper on one arm and I would have this deaf/blind person on the other arm. And, Ruth would want to buy lovely clothes and Margaret would want 100% cotton slips because she was allergic to this or to that. Ruth would want to give her, her mink coat and Margaret would worry about who was going to pay for storage. Ruth wanted to

give her, her alligator handbag and Margaret wasn't sure that she thought it was very comfortable to carry. There was a great deal of differences in opinions and I had to talk to one of them and teletype to the other one when we were out shopping; that was an experience.

But anyway, I was talking about the Brotherhood. And so, the Brotherhood has supported Margaret Warren. Margaret has probably been on SSI ever since SSI went into effect. And, that usually means that she got 25 dollars or maybe 35 dollars a month to buy her Kleenex, replace her underwear, postage if she was writing letters, paper for her Braille Writer; all of that kind of stuff. Anything that the Brotherhood contributed must have made her life a little more comfortable. That was certainly one organization.

I was asked different times to go down to the Randolph Hotel, which for those who don't know, at one time if they didn't rent it out by the hour they at least rented it out by the day. It was not a very safe place to be. It smelled bad and very, very strange people habited the lobby. But, up on the second floor, where the Presidential Suite was, was glorious. And, in its day, the Randolph Hotel had been a glorious hotel. The area rented by the NFB was purple marble. Beautiful fireplace and huge dining room, and then a modern kitchen and then just lots and lots and lots of kind of warehouse space that was not decorated at all.

I mentioned earlier that the 4th of July was always NFB Convention and Memorial Day was always State Convention. Well, then that meant that the other holidays that made for three-day weekends, rather that be Labor Day or Columbus Day or Thanksgiving or whatever; Mr. Jernigan often used those dates as retreats. He would invite leadership, potential leadership, maybe the Board, whatever, to come to

Des Moines and they would hole up there at the Randolph. And, he would prepare, or his wife, Anna Katherine, was a wonderful cook, would prepare gorgeous meals. Mr. Jernigan always tried to get you to drink this thing he called "NFB Tea," which started out with Tang and instant tea and then bottles and bottles of fruit juice. So, it might be apricot. It might be black cherry. It might be whatever, but he took great delight in preparing that and serving that. I don't know if anyone ever had the nerve to tell him that it was not the highlight of the trip.

Anyway, I would be summoned to come down, a lot of times starting on a Friday, and my job would be to read. And so, I would just read aloud and read aloud for seemingly hours to whoever was there attending. This was before the time of very much accommodation of materials. If it didn't come in Braille, then probably it had not been read onto tape or any other way for it to be accessible. Now, most of the leadership have all these wonderful Refreshable Braille devices and stuff, they don't need that live reader like they used to. But, I would find myself down there and, of course, that had nothing to do with my paid job. It was...I had the reputation of being able to read fast and articulate clearly. So, I got to meet the leadership of the NFB and the potential leadership from all over the country, as they would come there. What else can I tell you?

Ferguson: It's like an overload of information; so much stuff. I guess was this just...these training sessions or these extra duties; it was just kind of accepted? Did anybody really balk at it or did anybody...

Duvall: Those of us that were summoned to do that, you mean?

Ferguson: Yeah.

Duvall: It never crossed our mind to say, "No." No, Mr. Jernigan was very charismatic and he also had, he was very good at speech and debate, in that he really gave some powerful and inspiring speeches at the National Convention. "Join Us At The Barricades."

Ferguson: I've read that.

Duvall: Have you read that? Have you heard him?

Ferguson: I've not heard him but I've read it. It was just powerful.

Duvall: It is powerful. But, to hear him use his voice; it was just wonderful. He also had a technique where he would say things like, "I need you. I need you to be available Friday afternoon at 3." And so, what do you say? There is something about being needed that when presented in the form of a question is the only response is, "Yes, of course." And, he knew his people well enough to know who would willingly do things. Many of the people he hired some of us look back at that and say, "They were hired. They were like the sparrow with the broken wing. They needed a cause. They needed to have something to believe in. They needed to be part of a family." That there were things happening in those people's personal lives, either they had lost their job or they had gone through a divorce or something traumatic

had really affected them. And, then he would discover them or find them and he would find some way to meet their personal needs. So, then you start thinking about yourself and say, "Hmm, did I have a broken wing then?" And, one could say, "Yes, because I was newly divorced." You know, I had professional training but I was working as a Title Clerk at a car dealership; certainly not making enough money to make house payments and car payments and whatever. So, I needed to find something that was much more fulfilling and I could immerse myself in it and feel really good about the more I worked at something the better things were going to be. Yeah. Plus, it was a really good bunch of people that worked there, just a good bunch of people; most of the time, shirt off your back, kind of thing. Well, they got where they didn't like Tony Cobb. And, we're not sorry to see him go.

Ferguson: It seems very much that it's a tight community, like you said the shirt off the back. But, as soon as you step on the toes, you push somebody too far, it's like everybody blocks together and it's tough getting anything done.

Duvall: Yes, it really is. Yeah, it really is. Okay.

Ferguson: Well, if you don't have anything else you've gone through all my questions.

Duvall: All right.

Ferguson: So, I'm done if you're good.

Duvall: Okay.

Ferguson: Okay, then.

Duvall: We'll check with Karen.

(End of Recording 3) 14:51 (End of Interview)

Deb Brix May 30, 2011